

## John Cage's influence explored in 'Get Lucky'

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"Get Lucky: The Culture of Chance" at SOMArts will make some visitors wish for a more systematic genealogy of John Cage's artistic aftermath - a project that someone may one day attempt. Meanwhile, this one, co-organized by Justin Hoover and Hanna Regev, holds many pleasures and surprises.

"Get Lucky" gathers works by 29 Bay Area artists to celebrate the persistent influence of Cage 20 years after his death. As Kyle Gann and other commentators have noted, the nature of Cage's influence on composers and other artists depends on whether they knew him. Only a couple of people involved in "Get Lucky" did, so the exhibition mainly probes his posthumous influence.

Cage (1912-1992) personified good humor, curiosity and readiness to consider any creative course of action that might have liberating effects on himself or others.

Many people acquainted secondhand with his ideas or his work - particularly his use of chance procedures to avoid decision making and personal taste - regard his influence as destructive, parallel to that of his Dadaist friend Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968).

But anyone who talked with Cage soon found such a position unacceptably simple. Gann quotes composer William Duckworth as saying that "at first, I thought that Cage had given me permission to do anything I wanted to - a benign anything goes. But lately, I've been feeling that Cage's real influence was the instilling of an understanding that dedication, and the committing of time to what you believe in, is of the utmost importance, and creates a very different kind of composer than one focused on fame and fortune."

"Get Lucky" contains a lot of work that reflects the sort of discipline that indeterminacy disguises in Cage's work, as well as the permission it implies to defy all orthodoxy.

### Book of Genesis

Jon Kuzmich's ostensibly abstract painting stands out by its material subtlety, but it betokens the sort of effort that lay behind Cage's refusal of nonarbitrary decision making. Kuzmich has used sequential dots of acrylic paint to translate the Book of Genesis into patterns that encode consonants, vowels, spaces, symbols and numbers. He plans to give all 66 books of the King James Version of the Bible the same treatment.

In one sense, the most Cagean thing on hand is Jonathon Keats' "Retempered Clavier." On headphones connected to an iPod, the listener can get a taste of Keats' maddening revision of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," in which he has randomized 25 percent of the notes, consistent with an accompanying manifesto.

It reads in part: "Science began with the Copernican Revolution. Recognition that the world is an average planet, and that our place in the cosmos is nothing special, has allowed humanity to make generalizations about the universe based on local observations. Yet while the Copernican Revolution has enlightened scientists for centuries, art remains Ptolemaic. The work most cherished is esteemed for being atypical. Whether admired for academic skillfulness or avant-garde boldness, the masterpiece is our artistic ideal. If art is to foster universal understanding - and be more than a cultural trophy - the great works must be abandoned. We must banish masterpieces as distracting anomalies, just as scientists routinely discard artifacts from their data sets."

Cage was not given to this sort of irony, but he might have admired Keats' intellectual thoroughness and been amused by his detuning of Bach.

### References to music

Several other things in "Get Lucky" involve or make reference to music, most conspicuously Mauro Ffortissimo's "The I Ching Symphony." A long paper scroll descends from high above floor level, punctuated with broad brush marks that read as staves and with eccentric musical notation cascading through them. The scroll covers the upright carcass of a grand piano that the artist has refitted and wired - in homage to Cage's devising of the "prepared piano" - to make it playable and productive of sounds in ways never imagined by any piano builder.

Various works remind us that Cage worked in literary and visual media, as well as sound.

James Melchert's broken and reassembled ceramic triptych would invoke Cage's spirit in any setting.

So would Kirkman Amyx's "Financial News," a thicket of randomly dropped snippets from the business pages, digitally photographed and layered, bristling with dire references to financial markets as a gambling system.

In composing music and making or staging visual art, Cage frequently used the I Ching, the traditional Chinese divination system, as a means to give randomness to decisions.

Several pieces here make explicit reference to it, notably a work by Antonio Cortez in both static and digital display. By adept use of design software, Cortez translated the 64 two-dimensional hexagrams of the I Ching into colorful 3-D models, referencing, as Cage typically did not, the hexagrams' metaphorical associations.

**Get Lucky: The Culture of Chance:** Works in many media by 29 Bay Area artists. Through Jan. 26. SOMArts Cultural Center, 934 Brannan St., S.F. (415) 863-1414. [www.somarts.org](http://www.somarts.org).

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